

Students Leading Students: An Observational Study of a University Remedial Educational Program

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Abstract

This article provides a unique insider perspective developing leadership at the undergraduate level. A case study approach was used to examine the efficacy of a peer mentoring program for remedial students.

As Rob approaches the training/meeting classroom, his posture emanates an aura of confidence. Standing tall, with a long stride and his head up, he is a student with a mission. The semiweekly meeting is intended to help develop and support the skills of remedial students at Golden State University (GSU). He exemplifies the ideal outcome: a student, once remedial, emerging as a strong peer leader to remedial students entering the system.

Rob has not always been the confident student leader he is today. His confidence is a product of his academic and leadership experiences, not simply a set of traits. His training and practice have brought him to the point where he can effectively utilize his leadership skills to guide his group through the training materials and provide them with the skills they need to master their remedial courses. This article explores such leadership emerging as “a function of the situation” (Allen, 1952, p. 92). It is the type of leadership that often occurs spontaneously in times of crisis or adversity. We find that GSU’s remedial education program and its participants have fostered this type of leadership, an accomplishment that many have speculated is impossible to achieve.

In the area of higher education, the potential for perpetuating racial, ethnic, and economic inequality is most often examined from the perspective of student retention and degree completion. As U.S. society becomes more diverse and more integrated within a global economy, it becomes increasingly important that educational organizations prepare persons to participate in a diverse society and workplace (Farley, 2002). For this purpose, it is important that educational organizations develop an organizational climate conducive to nurturing and developing leaders who reflect multicultural values.

In addition to these challenges are the greater issues faced by higher education in the United States, such as the move toward privatization and marketization of the U.S. Department of Education. The 2017 appointment of Betsy DeVos, an advocate for such approaches to education, creates an atmosphere of competition and conflict that does not always benefit the development of leadership among students of color and other marginalized student populations. The values represented in such an approach are often at odds with those of the diverse students who attend institutions of public higher education. Moreover, the move toward privatization and marketization has occurred alongside the adoption of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) and California’s Local Control Funding Formula/Local Control Accountability Plan of 2013, both of which distort the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson in 1965. Described by Mathis and Trujillo (2016) the goal of the ESEA was to improve resources for states and districts by strengthening “the capacity of our most economically impoverished schools to provide high quality public education” (xvi). This goal has been initially undermined by a move away from support for public education and toward increased test-based regulation and by the minimum basic skills movements of the 1970s which placed a greater emphasis on math, science, reading and history at the expense of art, music, and sex education. In 2001, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) further consolidated a test-based, top-down, prescriptive, narrow, and punitive approach to improving schools (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). This all culminated in the ESSA, which was signed into law by President Obama in December 2015. This law represents a further move away from the original goal of the ESEA to use federal funding to protect historically underserved students, as it shifted responsibility for these students to the states. Instead of the unattainable Adequate Yearly Progress targets, state sanctions are imposed on underperforming schools. Moreover, the ESSA still follows the model of standardized testing in reading and math (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). For higher education, the

challenge of developing leadership in this climate requires creativity and an alternative to simply rewarding good test performance.

This research examined the impact of peer-led programs on remedial students. If it is the responsibility of the state and local school system to develop educational leaders, it is essential to examine the potential for various school programs to provide preparation and experience in developing leadership skills. We argue that peer leaders are instrumental in addressing the needs of a multicultural and diverse student body.

There appears to be a wide gap in the literature concerning peer-led approaches to remediation in higher education. A survey of the field reveals that a large portion of the available studies is concerned with the effects of mentoring programs on various achievement metrics (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Jacobi, 1991). Existing research emphasizes the effects of mentoring and mentoring programs on outcomes related to college success. However, as Jacobi (1991) points out, even though mentoring is widely recognized as having positive effects on student success, finding a common definition of mentoring has proven difficult. Nearly two and a half decades after Jacobi's study, the need case for a common operational definition has not changed (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Gershensonfeld, 2014). For example, parameters used in defining mentoring include the effect of mentoring over rates of college retention and the mentors' support in career planning (Nora & Crisp, 2007; Roberts, 2000).

In terms of the established research on undergraduate remediation, rather than unpacking the strategies and practices involved in the remedial process, existing studies tend to view such process as only one of the many factors that lead toward undergraduate success. In this case, the general consensus operationalizes "success" in terms of whether the students complete the requirements for a transfer or for the completion of a degree program (Bailey, 2009; Bettinger & Long, 2009; Burdman, 2012). Scott-Clayton and Rodriguez (2015) explore other outcomes, including subsequent course grades, skill development, and post-remediation test scores. Additionally, there is a considerable amount of scholarship that examines the effects of remediation among Latina/o students within the context of the larger structural inequalities and challenges they face (Acevedo-Gil, Santos, Alonso, & Solorzano, 2015; Chan, 2013; Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Solórzano, Acevedo-Gil, & Santos, 2013). Despite all the attention paid to remediation-related issues, the spotlight continues to fall on overall outcomes following traditionally established models of remediation.

Previous research on peer-led groups focused on students who did not deal with the remedial process, resulting in disenrollment (Blanc, DeBuhr, & Martin, 1983; Cross, 1996; Mannan, Charleston, & Saghafi, 1986; Scurry, 2003). Although this focus is important to understand how remediation benefits students, it overlooks how student-led study groups require the development and use of student leaders.

Research suggests that several factors facilitate the development of a well-informed, confident, and empathetic leader, including intimate working groups, an atmosphere of challenge and critique of concepts and ideas, problem solving at the student level rather than the instructor level, and student-to-student interaction; such characteristics run against the more common hierarchy in a traditional classroom (Barrow, 1977). Rather than being faceless and insignificant, or just a score on a standardized test, student peer-leaders are likely to feel special as a consequence of the personal, face-to-face relationships they have with their students. Additionally, it is reasonable to believe that the students will be more likely to challenge the authority and the knowledge of the student group leader (their peer) rather than those of a representative of the traditional authority structure (e.g., faculty, staff, or administrator), and this

represents a complete break from the top-down approach. Moreover, challenges from fellow students are less intimidating than those posed by professors and provide valuable experience for peer leaders to articulate ideas. This article examines how the interactions between student group leaders and students contribute to the emergence of a confident and empathetic student group leader.

Executive Order 665

Executive Order (EO) 665, pursuant of Title 5 (California Code of Regulations), was implemented in order to help the California State University (CSU) system contend with “Tidal Wave II” (the children of baby boomers), which would increase the need for additional funding and space (Munitz, 1997). Specifically, EO 665 requires that starting in the 1998 fall semester, all CSU students, including transfer and freshmen students, should display competence in English and math in order to avoid the *remedial* label. However, there are no standardized criteria that define the parameters of a remedial or developmental course (Attewell, Domina, Lavin, & Levey, 2006). In the case of the CSU, students are required to fulfill the ELM (entry level mathematics) and the EPT (English placement test) requirements depending on their success in each subject as reflected by their high school transcripts. This is done by (a) qualifying for exemption from the exams because of courses taken, (b) passing the ELM and EPT examinations, or (c) taking the ELM and/or EPT examinations and, in the event of not passing one of the tests or both, demonstrating competence by passing campus-approved programs or by retaking the exams. Students who do not complete a successful remediation program within their first year may be disenrolled. Reenrollment is contingent upon successful completion of remediation at the community college level. Approximately 80% of CSU students remediate within their first year.

Although well intentioned, EO 665 is not problem free. The Advisory Committee appointed by the Chancellor was comprised of staff and faculty and included no student representation, despite the obvious fact that its recommendations would surely affect students the most. Perhaps an unintended, but nonetheless detrimental, consequence of EO 665 is the denial of university access to students of low socioeconomic status and to those who are the first in their family to go to college. This is because low-income students are disproportionately represented among those who fail to meet the new college entrance requirements established by the executive order. King, McEvoy, and Teixeira (2011) argue that the class-based and racial inequalities reproduced via remediation policies constitute nothing less than a civil rights concern. They find that “high remediation campuses serve proportionally more low-income students and students of color than do the campuses with the lowest remediation rates”; moreover, “these students tend to come from segregated feeder high schools of relatively poor academic performance and high poverty” (King, McEvoy, & Teixeira, 2011, p. 27). These students, in turn, are disproportionately less likely to successfully remediate and, as a result, face a greater chance of disenrollment.

The Student Support Program

The Student Support Program (SSP) at Golden State University serves the population of first-generation, low-income, and disabled students who have scored “remedial” on their competency exams. The SSP is one of the campus-approved programs in which students labeled remedial may participate to successfully complete the remediation process. Admittance to the program is

based on a student's history of low family income, full-time enrollment, and California residency, along with the remedial status resulting from low scores on the ELM and EPT exams.

Although this program has confronted state budget cuts since its inception, it enjoys the highest success rates among the GSU's sister campuses in terms of remediation and graduation (Figueroa & King, 2000). What is of interest here is how peer-led programs have, in addition to addressing the need for remedial education support, helped to develop student leaders among racial and ethnic minority students who were formerly classified as remedial.

Leadership in Student-Led Peer Groups

Allen (1952) explains that leadership can be classified as either structuralist or functionalist. The former perspective views leadership as a "special trait or set of traits, residing within a person as a constitutional part of the personality structure," whereas the latter views leadership as "a function of the situation" (Allen, 1952, p. 92). Harrell and Forney (2000) note that mentoring and role modeling are important to the educational success of first-generation and racial and ethnic minority college students. Student support services can thus lead racial and ethnic minority students to success. As such, it is important that students in mentoring roles within student support services use leadership practices that help remedial students succeed.

The GSU program's mission addresses Tinto's (1987) sociological model that ties college retention not to individual student characteristics but to social solidarity, which fosters academic and social integration on campus. This social networking is especially difficult for "at risk" students, because they are often faced with constraints on their time due to familial obligations in addition to their inadequate training in primary and secondary education. As such, alienation often leads these students to avoid seeking mentorship and tutoring. African American and Latina/o students are more likely to study alone, which results in an inability to get help from fellow students in times of difficulty. This contributes to frustration and the failure to solve learning problems (Farley, 2002). As Garland and Triesman (1993, p. 15) suggest, this "is not a failing of the student; it is their reaction to a hostile institutional climate." Prior research on the matter of retention as a result of individual characteristics has looked at the experience of students who do not face the same adversity as remedial students. Therefore, little attention has been paid to the potential benefits to students that the SSP aims to help not only remedial student but also those who have successfully completed remediation. It does this by providing them an opportunity to act as leaders and positive role models for the remedial students who have come after them.

We argue that GSU's remedial education program provides an excellent model for other schools and universities seeking to empower and educate remedial students. This program creates an atmosphere that addresses the needs of students labeled remedial and also builds leadership among those who have successfully remediated so that they can act as positive role models for this unique population.

Student Leaders at Work: A Case Study

In order to examine the processes that occur in peer-led study groups for peer leaders, we have observed classrooms and administrative offices of the SSP at Golden State University, for a total of five separate classrooms and one workday observed over a nine-week period during the fall quarter. Additionally, the program conducted one training meeting prior to the beginning of the

quarter and four semiweekly meetings during the quarter. In these meetings, the study group leaders meet with team leaders and staff to discuss their experiences and challenges with one another. We have observed each of these training meetings and participated in the training too.

The observations were arranged to accommodate the schedules of the students in various locations across the campus. Each of the class visitations lasted one hour and 40 minutes, with follow-up observations of clerical and administrative staff in the SSP office. Lastly, we conducted in-depth interviews with the program participants, including one student, all five study group leaders, the program director, and a former coordinator of the study group component. These interviews lasted approximately two hours each.

In general, we sorted our observations into four general topical categories: (a) student/study group leader (SGL) interactions with regard to interpersonal and academic issues, (b) reference to peer leaders' authority and the importance of study group coursework, (c) specific references to state legislation affecting students, and (d) the manner in which peer leaders were able or unable to address each of the previous issues and how this contributed to the emergence of their positions as leaders in the classroom and beyond.

It became clear early in our observations that students developed strong relationships with the SGLs based on mutual respect and trust. In one instance, students took it upon themselves to properly arrange the classroom seating before the beginning of the session in order to receive approval from the group leader. Whenever students had not completed their homework assignments, they appeared to willingly accept the advice from the SGL to avoid the situation in the future. In turn, the group leaders were conscious not to make the students feel punished or judged. In an illustration of the trust between students and SGLs, one student went so far as to ask the SGL what to say when her mother told her that girls don't need to go to college. She wrote the SGL's response down word for word.

Interviews with students and study group leaders included questions pertaining to the relationships between them. When asked how she felt about participating in a peer-led study group, the one student interviewed answered that she felt "good" and noted that she liked the fact that there was no professor there, so that she could participate more freely. "I actually feel like a student and I can say things that don't sound dumb," she said, going on to explain that the class for which she was taking the study group was in a lecture hall with over 300 students. She continued, "Only the really smart people talk in that class, and I've never even talked to the teacher." The SGL expressed similar ideas when he observed that "students get a chance to actually participate in the study group." He went on to add that his personal experience in the classroom—especially in classes like general education, math, and English—had been discouraging. He described his own feelings of inadequacy and discomfort with the setting and the fact that only a very small number of students participated. When asked how his students felt about the small number of people in the group he stated, "What my students have told me is that they like that I am accessible for questions or just to talk to, you know? I've had students talk to me in my office hours about everything, and I do mean *everything*." He provided examples of past discussions about topics as mundane as what students ate for lunch and as serious as experiences with rape and confessions about criminal acts.

The program's training manual and website explicitly state that this is the type of atmosphere desired and required in the study groups. Specific rules of conduct describe how SGLs and all staff who interact with students are to treat them. They are not to do anything that will make the student uncomfortable speaking freely and honestly. Additionally, the training meetings often included troubleshooting sessions in which the SGLs could submit anonymous

accounts of difficult situations they had faced in their interactions with students. Fellow SGLs and team leaders then provided accounts of how they had handled similar situations. Finally, leaflets and flyers were circulated regularly that provided students with information on different on-campus programs and talks that would help them navigate the university bureaucracy. One advertised talk focused on how to communicate with professors.

Peer Leader Authority

Student/SGL interactions in the classroom often involved the discussion of class material or the assignment of coursework. The study group leaders in our observations were often questioned by the students in regard to their authority or knowledge. Questions about the accuracy of the information given by the SGL regarding notes taken in the class usually took the form of requests for clarification. For example, in one observation the SGL was asked what the professor had said about a particular concept. When the SGL gave his reply, the student asked the SGL if he was sure, because another student had given him a different answer. The SGL then asked the other students in the group what they had written down in their notes in order to clarify the answer. Other challenges to the authority of the SGL took the form of a failure to complete the homework assigned. Students often came into the study groups without having completed their homework, with excuses ranging from family responsibilities to work responsibilities, to outright refusals to complete the work. The SGL in each case offered advice rather than scolding. This way of handling the students' failure to complete their homework and similar faults (e.g., absence or tardiness) seems to be at the foundation of the program's rules for interaction with students.

In an interview, one SGL was asked if he ever felt as though the students took him less seriously than they did their professor. He replied:

Yes, but that's a good thing . . . the study group is a place where these students get to talk and say what's on their mind . . . what they're going through is real. It's not up to me to say it's not. So if they can find the courage to speak up, that's good . . . these students *need* to learn how to challenge authority. They've been programmed not to question. That's not good.

The program director responded to a question about the distribution of power within the study groups by saying:

Study groups are purposely set up so that an undergraduate, not a graduate, an undergraduate student is the leader. That was done to ensure that power or authority is as evenly distributed as possible. We don't want our [remedial] students to be comparing themselves to graduates or any other person on how they perform in the class. . . . If the leader is similar to them in age and experience, they can model themselves after them more easily.

When the student interviewee was asked if she felt that she could speak freely to her SGL or any other member of the program staff, she replied that she had questioned the director about the way he spoke to students about their remedial status when she was in Summer Bridge, a developmental transition program offered to incoming freshman. Her main complaint was that the director focused too much on the adversities remedial students faced. "He didn't stop doing it," she explained, "he still talked about it every time he talked to us at the assemblies, but at least he listened to me, and he said he would think about it, but that he had been doing this for a long time, and other Summer Bridge students ended up thinking it was good to know about it."

The SSP training manual provides detailed instructions on how classrooms should be run, and it explicitly delineates how study group leaders are to address students with respect and how they should handle the students' personal issues. This, coupled with the semiweekly meetings (that focus on how SGLs should not question why the program works), solidifies the unified appearance of the program. The fact that the SGLs that were interviewed had already participated in the program and successfully fulfilled the remedial requirements adds to the legitimacy of the communication style employed. Additionally, the manual offers instructions on how staff should interact with students and answer questions in a way that makes the students feel comfortable and not feel "rushed" or as though they are "bothering" the staff with "stupid" questions. Minutes from the semiweekly SGL meetings show that a segment of the meeting is always devoted to discussing how the SGLs were once students in the program. One set of minutes traces out the part of the meeting entitled "Troubleshooting—what to do when you can't get your students to participate." The minutes reveal an in-depth discussion of how to get soft-spoken or shy students to participate, providing examples of how different SGLs have helped students to overcome the "quiet problem."

Interesting to note was the reaction of the students to the frequency with which SGLs and the director of the program referred to their remedial status. In one classroom a student sat quietly not acknowledging what was being said and responded to questions from the SGL (e.g., "what do you think?") by saying, "I wasn't listening, what did you say?"; in another class two students let out heavy sighs, and one of them shuffled his books loudly and slammed them down on the desk. In both cases, the SGLs addressed these reactions with calm responses such as "I know how you feel about this, but don't ignore me. I was in your position too," or "I don't blame you for being angry, but you need to understand what's going on, what you're facing." In both cases the students' demeanors changed quickly; they sat facing their SGLs, as they are encouraged to do, and the class went on. In one interview, a student was asked how she felt about the fact that this information was repeatedly presented in class. She replied "I hate it, but I guess now I know what's out there against me. . . . I don't know what I can do or anything about it, you know, but at least I know I'm not the only one." She went on to say that she discussed her situation with the other students and they all agreed that they had to hear about their remedial status too often, but that they liked talking to each other about it because they were all in the same situation and did not feel negatively judged by one another.

The comments of the clerical staff, the administrative assistant, and the program director about the legislative requirements all revolved around (a) coping with budget cuts to the state university system, (b) students' problems and challenges, and (c) miscellaneous bureaucratic problems at the university that directly or indirectly affected the students.

The clerical staff handles grades, enrollment, and every other clerical issue related to the SSP. There are three clerical workers (all former students in the program) in the office. When observed, Tina, Isela, and Linda were each working on projects for the program. Tina was working on the quarterly report, essential for obtaining funds and avoiding budget cuts; Linda was helping a student who needed a book for a class that he still had not been able to buy in week four of a 10-week quarter; and Isela was figuring out a way to check students' grades from a previous quarter and that students were properly enrolled in classes despite having the complete access she needed from the campus computer system. Reina, the administrative assistant, assists the clerical staff. Each staff person expressed frustration with the oppressive bureaucratic state university system. Isela explained that she could not access the student records because the university had changed its record-keeping system and had not yet given the staff

their new passwords. Tina continued to work on her report without the student records needed to complete it.

Throughout the course of the day, various employees and students of the SSP would come into the office and ask if their problems had been solved, and participants at every level asked if they could help with the situation. The clericals did not leave for the entire time of the observation (a period of approximately five hours), except for brief breaks. Even a person from the neighboring tutorial office came by to ask the staff if they had obtained the records needed for the quarterly report. Tina replied, "We're still working on it." The neighbor shook her head and went on to tell Linda whom she could borrow the book from for the student she was assisting.

The three people observed provided important insight into the SSP. They talked about a need to focus on student needs, program funding, and political awareness by everyone involved in the program. They explained that due to potential budget cuts, the students and staff were anxious about the future of the program.

Four interviewees spoke of the relative success of this program in comparison to those at GSU's sister campuses, and they explained how this success did not protect the program from the risk of complete dissolution by the governor. The program director explained that the bigger problem lay in the 20-year decline in corporate taxes. His focus was on protecting his program from being completely cut. This was reinforced by a discussion with the current study group coordinator Jaime, who was going to speak at a meeting with the state university administration about the formation of C.O.S.T.S., the Coalition of Students, Teachers, and Staff, in an attempt to forge a long-term resistance movement to the continuing budget cuts. He explained that the former study group coordinator dealt with similar issues, and the latter confirmed this in her interview. When both former and current coordinators were asked how students dealt with the challenges faced by the program, they both had a similar reply. The former study group coordinator noted, "The SGLs are supposed to ask them how they're feeling, too." She claimed that SGLs were crucial to the program's success in this matter because they knew if the students were feeling pressure or stress:

That's the biggest part of their job. . . . If this was a company like the GAP, the SGLs would be the salespeople and the students would be the customers. They're the point of contact with the customer.

Both study group coordinators also described discussions among students about how to cope with the hostile environment in which they found themselves. For example, students helped each other study for upcoming final exams or planned to collaborate in preparing speeches for C.O.S.T.S. meetings and rallies. Again, the SGLs were identified as being essential to any type of coping strategy because they were the ones who interacted with the students most intimately and frequently.

The interviews also revealed the program's dedication to complete and total disclosure of the SSP's predicament to everyone involved. The director of the program explained:

This program came in response to the unequal opportunity presented to first-generation, low-income, and, in our case, racial minority students. We have to remind ourselves that this has not changed. It is only getting worse. . . . I know that students don't always like to hear it. They have enough to worry about, but I also think that it empowers them.

Joe, a study group leader said:

I straight out asked students if they felt better or worse about knowing what's going on, and my class was split up the middle. Some of them said they felt worse; they felt guilty when they didn't want to be part of the activism.

He added that the other half expressed a great amount of appreciation for being informed about what they were facing and felt good when they could go out and speak or march against it. Joe was active in the protests and rallies held by the students against the proposed budget cuts.

Among the documents we reviewed were rally flyers, leaflets, and photocopied articles distributed in the classrooms and the students' mailboxes. They focused on the most current administrative and political decisions affecting the program and its students. One article distributed to students and staff was entitled, "The Freshman Mind Yields Its Secrets to a Dedicated Sleuth." It discussed the importance of remediation and how college graduates often forgot that it is not a "low-level" activity. Another article, "High School—If You Earn It," explained what the director of the California Reading and Literature Project at UCLA proposed as an option for eighth-grade remedial students. She suggested that if they could not keep up with math and literacy skills, they should opt for remediation or an apprenticeship program rather than a high school diploma. This comment was not well received by the SSP staff. SGLs were urged at the training meeting to inform their students of what this meant for them. The SGLs got a complete explanation during the training meeting. These internal documents were generated and distributed frequently throughout the quarter. An SGL was asked how students reacted to these articles when they saw them. He said that many of them discussed them among themselves. He explained how students would get together and make plans on how they would "show those [expletive] who's not college material."

Conclusion

Prior research has neglected the effects of peer-led study groups on student leaders. Findings from this case study of a remedial education program at Golden State University demonstrate that student leaders were positively affected by their experience in the group and gained important leadership skills. This program encourages the participation of former remedial students, disproportionately students of color from low-income families, in leading study groups. Participation provides them the opportunity to confront challenges to their authority in an area with which they were extensively familiar. The part played by the student leader in addressing and alleviating the stress caused by the stringent state requirements laid down in EO 665 also revealed a further opportunity for the SGLs to exhibit and share their firsthand knowledge in a meaningful setting. The whole program's focus on the common problems experienced by the students (both current and former) resulted in the emergence of tightly knit groups in a common adversarial situation. This program stands in stark contrast to traditional models of education in which students are encouraged to passively listen to their teachers. In the SSP, challenges to peer leaders' authority were encouraged by members of the program in order to instill self-confidence among remedial students. Program participants were also encouraged to question authorities outside of the program and to participate in political struggles, especially those involved in maintaining funding for the program. This model of peer-led study groups at GSU could be a good model for other kinds of tutorial programs for remedial students at K-12 schools and universities that seek to build leadership skills among their students.

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